

What kind of employees become awarded as Employees of the Year in Finland?

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Abstract

Work is not simply about stress and fatigue; it can also be a great source of joy, satisfaction, and success. The aim of this research was to study the phenomenon of success at work: to identify of which elements success is constructed and what factors define the process of becoming a top worker. Finnish "Employees of the Year" (N = 24) were considered representative of successful workers because they have been awarded the title of "Employee of the Year" among and by their colleagues in different occupational fields. The focus of the research was on which factors participants named as sources of their success. On one hand, certain factors were identified that related to their own characteristics as workers and their way of working; on the other hand, some factors were related to how employees described satisfying work and well-functioning collaboration with colleagues. In the present article, the purpose is to focus on positive work experiences, such as experiencing joy from work and work engagement, and thus contribute to the discussion regarding the positive sides of work life today. In this research, success is defined as well-being at work rather than career-oriented behaviour. Positive psychology provides this interpretation of success at work.

Key-words: success at work, work engagement, joy of work, flow, positive psychology

JEL codes: J0, L21, M5

Introduction

Research on work life has paid attention to overburdening work conditions: negative concepts like stress, burnout, and lassitude are the most common descriptors in work-related research. This is not surprising in the present economic situation. It is true that a changing work life and efficiency expectations put employees in stressful situations. The subsequent feelings of fatigue, cynicism, and inefficiency can lead even to an occupational crisis (Hutri, 2002; see also Leppänen, 1999; Elo, 2000). However, if we focus only on the problems and negative aspects of work, the image of work life becomes unilateral (Mäkikangas, Feldt & Kinnunen, 2005; see also Riikonen, Makkonen, & Vilkkumaa, 2002). Indeed, Arnold et al. (2007, 201) point out that “it is possible that humanistic work values (the normative beliefs individuals hold about whether work should be meaningful) is an important influence on the likelihood of finding meaning in current work and psychological well-being”.

New research themes such as well-being, happiness, quality of life, and positive feelings have been introduced by positive psychology, which has provided research concerning not only positive characteristics and feelings but also institutions that enhance the discovery of positive feelings and strengths (Seligman et al., 2005, Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2006; see also Seligman, Parks, & Steen, 2004). Gable and Haidt (2005) briefly define the idea of positive psychology as the following: “positive psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions” (Gable & Haidt, 2005, 104). The aim of positive psychology is to study the reasons why people feel joy, show altruism, and create healthy families and institutions. This has been criticised because it concentrates on normal and healthy activities instead of helping dysfunctional people with their problems. On the other hand, focusing on such problems has taken attention away from studying why the majority of people are psychologically, physically, and socially healthy—happy, so to speak (Gable & Haidt, 2005)!

This is important because positive affect is associated with multiple positive outcomes, including better performance ratings at work, higher salaries, and improved health (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Therefore, feeling positive emotions towards work produces not only a quantitative improvement by increasing efficiency but also a qualitative one by making a better product or outcome that results from the virtue of pride, belief, and commitment to one’s job (Wright, 2004).

Success at work is often associated with career-oriented individuals who make sacrifices in other areas of life in order to achieve success. Materialistic values and career orientation have been emphasised. Consequently, control, production, results, and money have become central (see, for example, Riikonen, Makkonen,

& Vilkkumaa, 2002). What if success at work were defined in another way? Such a definition could consist of having feelings of expertise, competence, and accomplishment. Understood as the result of an inner drive to work well and as an expression of mastery, success is an indication of positive attitudes and well-being at work: given such a definition, everyone has an equal chance to succeed at work, in other words, more people would be considered successful.

The present research provides an extraordinary and unique insight into success at work because the participants in this research were all nominated as “employee of the year”. Each was awarded this title by his or her colleagues and evaluated as the best worker among them (some examples of these professions are psychologist, police officer, teacher, etc). Therefore, they can be considered representative of top workers. It should be noted that these people did not work in one particular field but had different positions and occupations. Because the high consistency between their descriptions of (positive) experiences at work was interesting, the writers of this article want to recognise and demonstrate the important role that positivity may play in well-being (see also Avey, Luthans, Smith, & Palmer, 2010).

The nature of work life is changing: engaging or binding oneself to work is no longer dependent on salary. Instead, employees’ personalities and moral valuations increasingly have a strong effect (Vähämäki, 2007). Therefore, it seems that studies are needed that bring other aspects of work life to the discussion and that shed light on the positive sides of work. That is one purpose of this article: to explore how you can not only cope in your work but also succeed. In addition, there is need for qualitative research that surveys human experiences, although this kind of research introduces a methodological challenge: namely, how to examine experiences without placing them into predetermined categories (Vähämäki, 2007; Mahoney, 2002). The importance of positive feeling as a source of human strength (see Isen, 2006) is a strong foundation for this research. Therefore, positive psychology is also used as a theoretical framework for success at work.

Positive Work Experiences: Key Concepts

Positive feelings support problem-solving skills and the ability to act in an innovative way. The importance and potential of this may seem surprising, as feelings of happiness are simple and common in nature (Isen, 2006). In the current research, because success was regarded as experiencing well-being at work, it is important to introduce some key concepts that were used.

Work engagement—referring to work drive—is a new positive concept that can be used to describe well-being and positive experiences at work. Schaufeli,

Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, and Bakker (2002, 72) have defined work engagement as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that includes three sub-scales: vigour, dedication, and absorption. Vigour refers to high levels of energy and willingness to work well in typical and in challenging, conflict-filled situations. It could be described as the feeling of “bursting with energy” when working. Dedication refers to having experiences such as appreciation for your work and being filled with enthusiasm and inspiration. Absorption refers to having a deep focus on work and the pleasure that follows the completion of work (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; see also Hakanen, Perhoniemi, & Toppinen-Tanner, 2008; Hakanen, 2002).

Work engagement, when understood with this definition, is similar to the concept of *flow* (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Flow is a subjective state of feeling control—or better yet, feeling that you can act without any control (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh, & Nakamura, 2005). According to Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon (2001), contrary to common belief, flow is more often experienced at work than in leisure (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001). Furthermore, features such as gender and cultural norms affect the experience of flow; however, in this research, the focus is on the experience of flow at work. Flow at work is usually experienced when goals are high and feedback is immediate and fair. In addition, the work itself has to include continuous challenges that meet employees' skills. Nevertheless, flow is a temporary feeling, whereas work engagement is a more stable and comprehensive state that does not focus on any particular task, behaviour, or individual. Flow is equivalent to absorption from the sub-scales of work engagement (Hakanen, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

The joy of work is experienced when an employee works as an engaged subject who can actively and comprehensively use his or her skills. In addition, the feeling of having found work that is suitable for oneself is essential. It is possible to define two kinds of joy of work: The passive one can be described as contentment with the relationship between one's actions and reality. Thus, the joy of work is like an assessment, whereas the active joy of work results from active behaviour and is merely an inner feeling (Varila & Lehtosaari, 2001). The joy of work can be a steady state, an overall happiness. However, it can also be experienced as a captivating emotion when it actually resembles the experience of flow.

Employees of the Year as Informants

In this research, participants presented top workers from different occupations. Each of them was nominated as "Employee of the Year" by Finnish labour unions, as most Finnish workers are members of a labour union in their own field. These top workers were considered representatives of successful workers and suitable informants for describing their experiences of success at work. Choosing the successful employees was not done by the researchers, ensuring that there was public justification for selecting the participants. The criteria for the award of "Employee of the Year" were gathered concerning the twenty occupations from which the participants were chosen (these occupations are introduced in the "Methods" chapter). The criteria were mostly found on the internet, but some of them were obtained through email inquiries to the labour unions.

Now we will briefly introduce how the participants were described with reference to the criteria for "Employees of the Year". In different occupations, the award emphasised different qualities that could be categorised into three groups of characteristics. Firstly, having a *high professional standard* was named as one of the most important qualities among the participants. Regarding this quality, expertise was recognized, referring not only to great quality of work but also to the ability to actively develop one's work and skills. The following occupations represented this theme best: priest, police officer, nurse, and psychologist. The second group consisted of employees' actions that led to making their work and occupation recognized. Examples of these actions included paying attention to the contents of the occupation (e.g. work tasks), publicly discussing current topics regarding their occupational field, and making Finnish proficiency recognized abroad. For example, the criteria for the "Artisan of the Year", "Journalist of the Year", and "Athlete of the Year" awards typified this theme. The difference between these two themes was that for the first one emphasised winners who had developed their field through their own professional development, while the second one emphasised winners who used their proficiency to gain publicity.

Some of the rewarded employees were selected not by their colleagues but through competitions. These competitions differ remarkably depending on the occupation (e.g. "Chef of the Year" and "Cleaner of the Year"). However, one feature is common among them: namely, the professional skills are evaluated from several sectors (e.g. customer service skills, working methods) that depict occupational core expertise. In other words, only a true professional can win this kind of competition. Therefore, employees who had simply been nominated for a competition were also asked to participate in this research—employees who had been selected for these competitions from their workplace had already been nominated by their colleagues.

In addition to the three themes mentioned above, the criteria for the “Employee of the Year” awards can be studied by analyzing the specific words describing the awards. Three different categories were found: attributes that describe top workers, action-related attributes, and profession-specific qualifiers. The most common attributes were adjectives such as competent, innovative, punctual, celebrated, effective, open-minded, and social. Action-related descriptions covered factors such as developing work and occupation, improving one’s occupation, making one’s occupation noted in Finland and abroad, dedication to one’s occupation, and active co-operation. Profession-specific qualifiers were language proficiency, tidiness, expertise, care for one’s own and others’ well-being at work, punctuality, a well-functioning business idea, courage to create new ideas, co-operating skills, and service skills. Top workers’ attributes were essentially words that described employees, regardless of occupation. Action-related attributes paid attention to how employee had been working or what an employee had done in order to earn the nomination. Profession-specific qualifiers referred directly to occupation and specific profession-bound skills. Thus, one qualifier could describe several occupations but with different meanings, e.g. tidiness can be considered differently among taxi drivers, chefs, and cleaners).

It was interesting to note that the criteria for “Employee of the Year” did not differ much from field to field. The aim of this introduction was to give an idea concerning the kind of characteristics that were emphasized by the criteria. Nevertheless, it is worth pondering how much this actually framed the picture of successful employees that is formed by this research, as winners of “Employee of the Year” awards were, and still are, mainly selected by their own labour unions. For example, making one’s occupation renowned can be advantageous for the unions and thus influence someone’s selection. Additionally, persons who are more sociable could be seen as more appealing when being selected as “Employee of the Year”.

Nonetheless, and most importantly, “Employee of the Year” winners are top workers rewarded in their own field. Thus, they constitute a group of successful and excellent workers.

Research Method, Data, and Analysis

The research had two phases. In the first phase, success at work was studied by focusing on motivation as well as on work engagement. In addition, those characteristics of work considered the most rewarding by participants were studied. The participants had been nominated as “Employee of the Year” between

the years 2001 and 2004 in a variety of occupational fields². Altogether, 44 employees were contacted. Of them, sixteen participated by answering questionnaires. Five of them were men, and eleven were women. Seven of those who answered to questionnaires were interviewed during the first phase of the study. Participants were between 29 and 71 years old (mean = 49).. Their occupations represented different fields and could be divided into the following professional groups: academic occupations (n = 5), artistic occupations (n = 6), and labourers (n = 5).

The research used a mixed-methods approach (see, for example, Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003; Creswell, 2002). Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews in 2005. Questionnaires consisted of both quantitative and qualitative parts, on which this article concentrates. The participants were asked to describe

- their experiences about their work (*What way do you usually experience your work (e.g. rewarding-frustrating, interesting-boring) and why?*),
- the significance of their work (*How important do you consider your work and why?*),
- their work-satisfaction (*Are you usually satisfied with you work and why? Please, write also about what inspires you in your work.*),
- challenges in their work (*Is your work challenging? Do you think that you are capable of handling these challenges? Why?*),
- whether their work was rewarding (*Is your work rewarding?*),
- the most important characteristics of their work (*Mention three things that you consider as the most important in your work. Why have you chosen this particular work/occupation?*),
- and themselves as workers (*What kind of employee are you in your opinion? Please, describe yourself as a worker*).

The interviews were based on the questionnaires and were qualitative theme

² Employees of the year represented the following awards: in the first phase, Coach of the Year, Artisan of the Year, Cleaner of the Year, Nurse of the Year, Doctor (of Medicine) of the Year, Industrial Designer of the Year, Farmer of the Year, Textile Artist of the Year, Psychologist of the Year, Police Officer of the Year, and Graphic of the Year, and in the second phase, Nurse of the Year, Farmer of the Year, Police Officer of the Year, Artisan of the Year, Priest of the Year, and Psychologist of the Year.

interviews, meaning that all the themes in the interviews were decided beforehand but that the order and form of the questions were not (Hirsjärvi et al., 2000). In other words, the interviewer made sure that all the predetermined topics were discussed, but the order and extent could vary (Eskola & Vastamäki, 2001). In this research, the researcher analysed the questionnaires before each interview and, based on that analysis, determined the focus of each interview. For example, if a participant had found it difficult to answer a certain question on the questionnaire, that theme was discussed more thoroughly in an interview. Therefore, the themes in the interviews were the same for everyone (work motivation, experiences about work, and participants' characteristics as workers) but were given different emphasis according to the participants' answers in the questionnaires.

Qualitative content analysis emphasises a relevant selection and rational organization of categories (Kracauer, 1952; Mayring, 2000). In this research, the data were analysed through qualitative content analysis with predetermined categories derived from a theoretical background (e.g. the key concepts mentioned). This formed the basis for analysis. Furthermore, these categories were divided into reasonable subcategories that emerged in the data (based on the number of references).

The second phase of the research concentrated on the process of becoming a top worker. Employees of the year that were interviewed in the second phase of the research ($n = 8$) were nominated between the years 2005 and 2006 (nurse of the year, farmer of the year, police officer of the year ($n=2$), psychologist of the year, priest of the year ($n=2$), and artisan of the year). Six of them were men, and two were women. Participants were between 36 and 64 years old (mean = 49). In the interviews, the participants were asked to discuss the following themes: factors that enhance success, difficulties and obstacles that they had confronted, and choices and decisions they had made during the course of their lives. This was narrative research, and the data were collected in 2007 using interviews.

Narrative research can be defined as research that utilises or analyses data that is collected via narratives (e.g. biographies) or other such ways (e.g. anthropologists' observational narratives). Thus, a narrative can be either a research object or a means to study a phenomenon (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber 1998). Narrative research does not focus on objective and generalised facts but on local, personal, and subjective information—this is considered a strength of narrative research because informants' voices can be heard authentically (Guba & Lincoln 1994). Narratives can also be used when analysing the reasons for actions (Moilanen, 2002). In this research, the narrative interview was complemented with characteristics of the theme interview to best serve this research, aiming at *thick description* of the phenomenon of success at work (see Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Polkinghorne (1995) distinguishes *the analysis of narratives* and *narrative*

analysis. The former means categorising, for example by types, and metaphors. The latter refers to the composition of a new narrative based on various original narratives. Both of these analysis methods were used in this research: on the one hand, the participants' narratives were categorised by predetermined categories, and on the other hand, a narrative of becoming a top worker was composed (see also Kuusela, 2003).

In this research, an analysis of narratives and narrative analyses were made. In this research, the analysis was made using narrative structuring that tries to put together a cohesive narrative of experiences and events during interviews (Kvale, 1997). Furthermore, the analysis typified a category-content-focused approach, with parts of narratives being placed in different categories (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998).

The present article focuses on the positive work experiences had by employees of the year. Thus, the results, from both phases of the original research, concerning this topic are reported in this article.

Research questions

The aim of this article is to describe whether the employees of the year had positive work experiences and how they described those experiences. This article answers the following questions:

- 1) What factors did the employees of the year recognise as the secrets of their success?
 - i. How did the employees of the year describe their own characteristics as workers and their way of working?
 - ii. How did the employees of the year describe the characteristics of satisfying work and well-functioning collaboration with colleagues?

Results

Work drive, engagement, and the joy of work as key factors

All employees of the year thought that their work was rewarding. According to the interviews, new challenges and chances to develop themselves at work made them most excited. It seemed certain that they experienced work engagement and joy of work. From the sub-scales of work engagement, the significance of work refers to dedication. All the participants were proud of their work and considered their work meaningful, regardless of occupation.

Furthermore, the sub-scales of flow, namely vigour and absorption, appeared in their descriptions.

"I am able to concentrate so deeply that I fall out from reality. I can close my ears, and my husband tells me I'm closed book.... I am riveted by my work, and I see it as a blessing."

The employees of the year emphasized the meaning of having a balanced combination of family and work; they thought that it was crucial that they make career-related decisions with their families. For each participant, the solution was unique, varying from equal division of labour between spouses to a situation in which one spouse was working while the other took care of the home. The main point was that the decision was made together by taking into consideration the aspirations and situations of both, so that neither partner had to sacrifice his or her own career for the other (see also Uusiautti & Määttä, 2010).

"When my children were young, we had a system. They were at day care only part time, ten days a month. I spent all my days off at home, as did my spouse, too, but not at the same time as I did. It went quite well like that. And we spent a lot of time with our children."

"We made the effort to plan schedules together. I had irregular working hours, but my spouse had standard ones. He was at home when I had the busiest season at work."

The employees of the year took care of their recovery from working hard, and they emphasised the significance of a good hobby. Hobbies were seen not only as a counterbalance to work but also as an activity that provided resources for work. For example, a priest enjoyed reading and writing both novels and poems in his leisure time. This also enhanced the writing skills needed in his work, those

for writing sermons, speeches, articles, etc. The counterbalance is no less important character of a hobby than the above mentioned; rather, a positive relation between feeling recovered during leisure time and job performance over time has been proven (Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Mojza, 2009).

Positive psychology pays attention to leisure time activities and their significance. Positive feelings have links to physical health (e.g. preventing physical stress disorders), psychological health (e.g. positive coping strategies), and social health. The latter refers to the fact that happy people are more likely to create happy and reciprocal social relationships (Carruthers & Hood, 2005). In this sense, a hobby that produces positive experiences, happiness, and a well-balanced life has an impact on success at work, where physical, psychological, and social health are needed.

Above all, the most extraordinary characteristic among employees of the year was their positive attitude, which described the attitude of all the informants. When facing conflicts, they did not give up. Instead, they saw such situations as opportunities to reassess their occupational skills and, if necessary, to study and develop. Thus, conflict situations were seen as problems that had to be solved. This kind of positive and optimistic attitude was at the very core of the participants' other characteristics and may explain why they did not consider demanding situations to be stressful.

"Firstly, you have to try again if it's worth it. And if it's not, it might be that you weren't right after all. But then again, you can think that now it's time to look at the mirror and accept the fact that that way isn't leading anywhere and find another one. This I have done many times along my way. And what else can you do...?"

"Sometimes I think if I'm a little bit stupid.... But I'm not, because it might be that I don't see those [conflict situations]. I've always taken more responsibility than I should have and thus got more interesting duties...."

This is a reminder also of the proactive attitude (as opposed to reactive) (see Covey, 2006). Proactive people can change their behaviour, see things from a different light, make choices, and know what they want. Reactive people, on the other hand, concentrate on things that they cannot control or change, such as other people's weaknesses and poor circumstances. Accordingly, the proactive ones function in more effective and positive ways.

Challenging work appreciated the most

Some common factors emerged when the employees were listing the most important factors, providing positive experiences in their work. The most significant factor was the challenges at work and chances to improve their skills and/or their work. They described such situations as those in which you can learn more and develop yourself through new challenges at work. The participants emphasized that recognizing your core skills is essential because then it is possible to concentrate on doing what is the most suitable for you. Indeed, knowing your strengths and weaknesses as well as your values and interests is crucial for enhancing your career (see also Arnold, Robertson, & Cooper, 1993).

"I'm excited mostly in situations that enable me to develop something, to change something into better and more reasonable direction."

"Every day is different. It's challenging to see every customer as individuals and not as a group of clients!"

"I can actually say that we have very diverse education at work. And all such courses help doing this work, as this environment is changing constantly and, of course, the whole society. That educating yourself continuously like this is essential for keeping up your proficiency."

Surprisingly, participants were not mavericks at their work, but they highly valued successful and fluent co-operation with their co-workers. Also, it has been discovered that social support is an effective means of enhancing self-esteem and feelings of mastery (Rousseau, Salek, Aubé, & Morin, 2009) and thus promotes success in work. Argyle (1987) has pointed out that contentment with relationships in the workplace, both horizontal— between employees—and vertically—between employers and employees—is central to happiness at work.

"I like working in teams. It's interesting to work with different kinds of people."

"I think that the most powerful experiences at my work are those when we are working together as a group."

"I think that [good relationships in the work place] are an unquestionable precondition; everybody works better when you feel good.... So, if you spend five or ten minutes chatting, it doesn't harm because it contributes to system in general."

Thirdly, participants considered chances to work autonomously and

independently as one of the most important characteristics. The Job Demands–Resources model suggests that job resources (e.g. autonomy, immediate feedback, and rewards) are especially salient for resource gain, for example, true well-being and motivation at work, also termed work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In addition, individuals should be encouraged to take care that they rest, to engage in positive work reflection, and to prevent negative work-related thoughts (Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Mojza, 2009, 244).

"I can self determine what I'm doing and when."

"I can determine the content of my work."

Conclusions

This research showed that positive experiences in one's work (both the work itself and the employee's way of working) were at the core of success. Employees of the year found their jobs pleasing. Having a holistic positive experience is crucial to this (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; see also Mäkikangas, Feldt, & Kinnunen, 2005). As well, finding a balance between an employee's skills and work-related expectations, chances and challenges leads to better performance at work, contentment, higher motivation and self-efficacy (Mäkikangas, Feldt, & Kinnunen, 2005).

How could success at work be outlined then? The positive attitude that employees of the year had towards work and life in general was the common factor among them. When outlining the phenomenon of success at work, the way in which the participants experienced their work seemed to lie at the core of success. Their positive experiences regarding their work and themselves as employees can be seen as a salient factor, whereas the other features of work—professional proficiency, life situation (introduced in this article), work motivation, and personality (discussed in more detail in the original research; see Uusiautti & Määttä, 2008)—merely appeared to be dependent on this positive experience. However, all of the factors affect each other to a certain extent. Especially, the above mentioned features of work seemed to affect both the experience of work and work motivation. All of the special features together form the basis and prerequisites for success at work. The interconnectedness of these factors is illustrated in Figure 1.

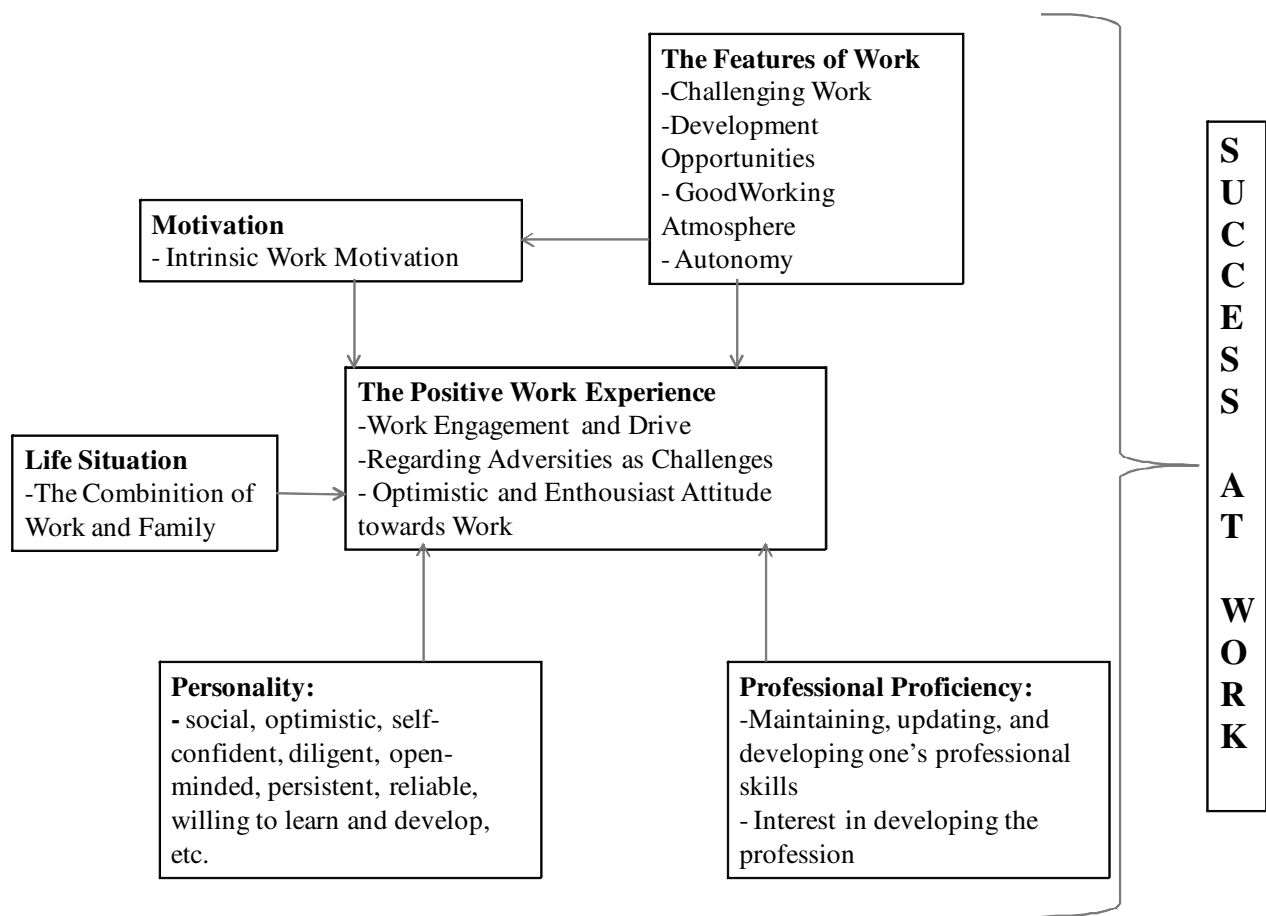


FIGURE 1. The interconnectedness of the factors that explain success at work among employees of the year (ANONYMOUS, 2008)

Placing the experience of work in the centre is, in fact, a unique way of understanding success at work because it is not usually considered the most salient factor when compared, for example, to work motivation (cf. Ruohotie & Honka, 2003). Therefore, this research contributes a new way of understanding success at work and well-being at work, with emphasis being on a holistic positive experience.

In this research, gender-bound experiences were not studied because of the research's already-limited target group and because no major differences occurred among male and female participants (e.g. both men and women emphasised the importance of making their career-related decisions together with their spouses). One could also ask to what extent the expectations of the media affected the way the participants described their work and experiences. This could be an issue with the questionnaires, but in the interviews, the participants contemplated their experiences thoroughly. At the second phase in particular, when they described their entire life stories, their answers could not

have been entirely structured according to extrinsic norms or expectations and were thus considered reliable and valuable.

Discussion

The positive development that leads to becoming a top worker cannot be considered separate from an individual's environment (Magnusson & Mahoney, 2006). Factors outside working life that have an effect on success are overall life situation, family, friends, hobbies, physical and psychological health, and so on. Up until the 1970s, Finnish workers considered work more important in their lives than home and leisure time outside work. In the 1980s, values began changing, as home and family started to become more appreciated (Maljojoki, 1989). Today, these factors are of greater importance in employees' lives than ever before.

Finland has become famous for its high-rated education and good living standard as well as for Finnish employees' good work ethic and various achievements. This research was not quantitative, thus any comparisons with Finnish employees in general are difficult or impossible to make. Still, some recent research provides interesting guidelines regarding what kind of attitude Finnish workers have towards work. For example, the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES) of Finland has studied working conditions and contentment (see Miettinen, 2006) and has listed factors that employees value the most at their work. Among employees who were mostly very pleased with their jobs, the factors that were appreciated the most were the following: interesting content, autonomy, variation at work, and social relationships with co-workers. Of these factors, autonomy and social relationships were also important to employees of the year. The difference between Finnish workers in general and the participants in this research occurred in relation to employees' attitudes towards opportunities for developing and educating oneself and the need for challenges at work. Namely, these were highly appreciated among employees of the year but not among ordinary workers.

The variation between top workers and ordinary ones can be studied from another perspective as well. Of Finnish workers in general, two-thirds of managers, half of subordinate managers, and one-third of workers reported considering education and development at work to be very important (Aitta, 2006). In the present research, this kind of variation between different positions did not occur. Instead, all employees of the year, regardless of their position, appeared to be extremely eager to educate themselves.

The results are in line with previous research, too. For example, Kinnunen, Feldt, and Mäkikangas (2008) found that increasing the rewarding aspects of work—instead of decreasing effort—could be especially efficient for increasing work engagement. Additionally, researchers have demonstrated that well-being is impacted by core concepts of positive psychology such as hope (see Snyder, 1994), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and optimism (Carver & Scheier, 2002). These characteristics were common to participants—especially, the optimistic attitude towards work and life in general.

What can be learned from the employees of the year? It seems that having positive experiences is a key factor in success and well-being at work. As well, a lack of absenteeism and a willingness to stay in the same job—engagement, so to speak—are significant. Employees of the year could be described as true “tryharders” because of their optimistic attitude both when confronting obstacles and when striving forward in their careers and other work-related ambitions. According to Tugade and Fredricksson (2004), there are individuals who seem to “bounce back” from negative events quite effectively, whereas others are seemingly unable to get out of their negative ruts; participants seemed to represent the former group. In addition, participants were passionate about working consummately. Indeed, it has been discovered that high work engagement magnifies emotional responses concerning perceived success or failure (Britt, 1999).

This research showed also that regardless of occupation or position, employees of the year appreciated well-being at work over hard values, such as making a good salary. This result is in accordance with Quick’s (1999) definition of healthy work: “Healthy work exists where people feel good, achieve high performance, and have high levels of well-being” (Quick, 1999, 123). In order to gain positive experiences from one’s work, an employee has to be (intrinsically) motivated to do this particular work and to accomplish the tasks and goals that are set. Work itself can motivate. However, in the present research, it was also discovered that when the work content lacked any interest but when its other characteristics, such as challenges, autonomy and work environment, appealed to employees, positive experiences were more likely to be achieved.

It is worth noticing that success at work is not a temporal state but a process that takes years and requires hard work. Still, it is worth remembering that you can succeed in every occupation, if success at work refers to the positive experience and well-being. Sometimes this kind of enthusiastic and proactive employee is recognised—maybe even as an employee of the year!

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